

New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis and Pedagogy

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Abstract

Roopika Risam's *New Digital Worlds* interrogates the ongoing digitization of analog cultural records that came into existence during colonial times. Risam contends that the processes which produced the initial analog records were often animated by a mix of ethical egoism, racial bias and cultural caricature. Risam proposes a way out by embracing decolonial computing: a spectrum of techniques that seek to elevate historically-disadvantaged worldviews. Risam hopes to employ interventionist data approaches to address the challenges brought to bear upon peoples continually affected by colonial aggression.

Traditionally, the field known as digital humanities (DH) brings digital computational methods to bear on traditional humanities scholarship. When digital humanities tools are applied to cultural artifacts, sociofacts and mentifacts, a *digital cultural record* may be produced. Post-colonial digital humanities (PDH) pushes the envelope by interrogating the 'human' in digital humanities. PDH approaches the digital cultural record by way of a hermeneutic of suspicion, recognizing that there exists no suppositionless position from which to engage DH. Concretely, PDH rests on the premise that, in creating the first analog cultural records, colonial authorities chose to advance colonial interests whenever such interests bifurcated from those of the colonized. When such analog records are eventually digitized, inherent imperfections simply migrate into the digital domain. 1

In *New Digital Worlds*, Roopika Risam takes the position that such migration of imperfections precipitates the disruptions that subsist within the digital cultural record. PDH, consequently, aims to uncover and intervene in disruptions produced by colonialism and neocolonialism. It tackles the shadows cast by the hermeneutical position of the colonizers who created cultural records for the colonized. 2

The digital cultural record, as a by-product of historical research work, naturally inherits all the riddles emanating from the historical method. For instance, the word history means 'what happened in the past', but it also means 'the study of what happened in the past'. Historians often make a distinction between *histories from above* [Katz 2013] and *histories from below* [Bhattacharya 1983]. *Histories from Above* dwell upon the big books, the big concepts, the big institutions, the big thinkers, the big events and the so-called golden ages. *Histories from Below*, on the other hand, account for historical events from the perspective of ordinary people rather than leaders – emphasizing the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, the non-conformists, and other marginal groups. 3

In light of those two broad approaches to history, questions immediately arise regarding the production of the digital cultural record. PDH embraces *history from below*, while accusing colonial authorities of embracing history from above. Throughout the book, Risam maintains the need to checkmate the potential and actual violence that colonized peoples have endured because of the existence of uncritiqued cultural records, whether analog or digital, coming from above. Risam gives several reasons why such interventions are necessary. 4

To begin with, the uncritiqued digital cultural record has consequences for people's lives. Risam cites an example from Puerto Rico. Following the devastation of Hurricane Maria in 2017, it was found that existing digital maps (created by digitizing colonial analog maps) were insufficient to support relief efforts. People suffered and died as relief agencies 5

faced difficulties in navigating the devastated island. The Mapathon project, a PDH endeavor, helped fill the “gaps and omissions” [Risam 2018, 24] subsisting in the initial maps. Updated maps produced by the Mapathon project helped to render relief efforts more efficient, thereby saving hundreds of lives.

In addition, re-evaluating the cultural record will help to checkmate the epistemic violence which animated its initial production. Ontological categories do not typically translate properly from one culture to another. Consequently, the colonial endeavour to articulate universal claims generally meets with deep-seated conceptual stumbling blocks. Colonizing empires often created justifying narratives by resorting to making caricatures of peoples, things, and mores that do not fit snugly into the colonial mindset. Evidence of such caricatures abound in historical records: records which end up getting digitized. A lot of psychic damage occurs when such records are employed in education, as colonized youths find themselves at the receiving end of a pedagogy designed for mockery. Timely interventions by PDH will go a long way in correcting those anomalies.

Furthermore, carefully crafted PDH projects will help to stem the tide of widespread misrepresentation – one of the consequences of broadcasting widespread caricatures. Nowadays, millions of people get their information from digital media. Inundating digital media with negatively-biased cultural records exponentially multiplies opportunities for misrepresentation, naturally leading to pervasive misunderstanding and a breakdown in communication. A cascade of errors ensues, first leading to a devaluing of Black and indigenous lives, then to the defunding of African-American, Americana, Black, and Ethnic studies, as witnessed in a number of universities in the West [Risam 2018, 15] [Rhodes 2016] [Brewer 2019].

Another reason to embrace PDH is to further enhance knowledge from the margins, an emphasis of history from below. A famous African thinker once said that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter [Brooks 1994]. By choosing to lend a voice to the historically-disadvantaged *digital* Dalits and subalterns [Risam 2018, 10], Risam hopes to explore the unexamined questions of power, globalization, and colonial ideologies (emanating from the global north) that have shaped the digital cultural record. By choosing to hear from the kings, queens, peasants, and outcasts of history, the author hopes to produce a richer encoding of the past as embodied in the digital cultural record.

Going further, PDH intends to pay attention to decolonial computing, which calls for renewed attention to critical race theory within technocultures [Risam 2018, 139]. After much practice and rumination, data scientists eventually learn that data is not information, information is not knowledge, knowledge is not understanding, understanding is not wisdom. Decolonial computing is about interrogating who is doing computing, where they are doing it, and, thereby, what computing means both epistemologically and ontologically. PDH questions the hitherto presumed political and ethical neutrality of computing techniques. Myriad questions about the objectivity of technical methods are re-examined in new light.

This book is recommended for scholars that recognize the utmost importance of critical historiography, while intending to expand the frontiers of digital humanities. Risam walks the talk through a comprehensive listing of named PDH projects which take *history from below* seriously. Risam’s unusual decision to examine the conceptual frameworks that animate the design of computing systems remains a good example of dialectical engagement animated by a philosophical spirit. The products of PDH research work will make tacit knowledge explicit, shed light upon hermeneutical blind spots, and shake up existing digital humanities pedagogy. The new approaches proposed will go a long way in answering many old, lingering questions.

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